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To Jesus with Mary

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Introduction

A few months ago, our Superiors declared the year 2024 a year dedicated to the Mater Dei, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the choice Don Orione made of that title as the official one for the Congregation. This invitation inspired me to go search among sermons and lessons which throughout the years I have made about Mary and organize them into a booklet. While reading and reviewing my notes I deepened my conviction on the necessity of taking Mary, a companion on the journey of religious life and as a model in daily activities. This booklet, therefore, is not a unified treatise but rather a collection of reflections on various aspects of our Marian devotion. The fragmentary structure means that some concepts are repeated, but if this helps to better understand the topics, then so be it. The positive aspect of this fragmentary structure is that you do not need to read the book in one go from beginning to end; you may make use of a chapter or another according to the specific aspect you may desire to delve into.

Why Mary? St. Luigi Orione, in one of his "good night" talks, said: "*Our Lady opens the way for us, that is, she opens our hearts to the true, sincere love of Jesus. Indeed, she is the fastest and safest way to Jesus Christ. Whoever finds the Mary, certainly also finds Jesus… If we pay close attention to what the Gospel indicates, it is always the Most*

Holy Madonna who shows us Jesus: she shows him to us as an infant in Bethlehem, suffering in the circumcision, working in Nazareth, evangelizing at Cana through the first miracle, and she shows him dead for us on the cross…" I started precisely from there. I took the various passages of the Gospel where Mary is mentioned to see what face of Jesus she presents to us. Mary has truly been an instrument for rediscovering the wonderful plan of love God has for us. She has walked ahead of us; she is already at Jesus's side, but she still looks at us and urges us: "*Follow me; you can do it too…*" Let us be challenged by Mary's example and let us be guided by her: as a good mother, she will not let us fall. Under her guidance, it will be much easier to find Jesus, even in the darkest moments.

Immaculate Conception

Among all the saints, Mary is the one we love and venerate the most. However, we often celebrate her for something that is not easy to understand, and this is perhaps a bit dangerous. Let's take, for example, the first great mystery that touches her life: being conceived without original sin. We know that original sin is what caused sin to enter the world, so if we do not fully understand what we are celebrating, we risk falling into two errors:

- We might think that Mary was holy only because, not having original sin, she no longer felt temptations or desires to do anything wrong.
- Or we might ask: why didn't God grant us this same gift?

Naturally, both these ideas are wrong. Mary is like each of us. She did not have the original sin but she had doubts, desires, and temptations like all of us. After all, even Jesus was tempted. She committed no sin because she knew how to fill herself with the love of God and let it be the driving force of her life. Naturally, living in close contact with Jesus favored her.

Seeing Mary so high and privileged by God does not help us have a true relationship, neither with her, whom we feel so distant and different, nor with God, who would seem to be unfair in some way. It is better, instead, to look at the

Gospel because there Mary is always presented as a person very close to us, a model of life and faith to follow. She was a young woman of deep faith who faced a lot of challenging events in her life, like the choice of virginity, the marriage, the simplicity of 30 years in Nazareth, and the extraordinary three years of Jesus's public life: a life always oriented towards God and her son.

To better understand what we said, let's take some inspiration from the episode of the Annunciation. We will deal with it more calmly in the next chapter, but let me anticipate some aspects here.

The angel greets Mary with three words: Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

"*Rejoice*" is a messianic greeting, used many times by the prophets to announce the coming of the Messiah, but it is always addressed to the whole people of Judah. However, it is now addressed directly to her. Mary, at this moment, is welcoming the Messiah not only as a mother but also as a member of her nation; she, therefore, becomes the representative of all those who await the redemption offered by God.

"*Full of grace*." This word, which is a verb and not an adjective, appears only twice in the New Testament, here and in the letter to the Ephesians which says: "*The grace with which he has filled us in his beloved Son*." From that passage, the depth of this verb's meaning is understood. It expresses something more than a simple favor or protection;

it is "*filled with goodness by the love of the Lord."*
"*The Lord is with you*" was the usual greeting given to people, but in the form "may be with you." Here it says "is with you," indicative mood; it is not a wish but an acknowledgment of reality, and this, after the "full of grace," assumes particular significance.
Mary's abashment is obvious. She understands that something important is happening, but cannot grasp what. Then the angel announces that she will give birth to Jesus. She still does not understand how it is possible, but in her heart, she has already said yes. She needs the angel to show her the way to follow because she is sure that the desire for virginity, she feels, is also a gift from God and a vocation.
Her willingness to accept the mission, despite the doubts she still has, makes her different from other biblical figures who had received a mission from God: Moses, Jeremiah, Gideon, Zechariah, among others. These people raised doubts about their situation. Their doubts might seem like humility, but are instead questioning God's choice and their ability to succeed.
Here, I introduce a second point from the letter to the Ephesians. Paul says to the Christians of Ephesus: "*In Jesus, God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight, in love*." Paul tells us that we too have the same vocation as Mary to be "blameless," and he also indicates how to live this vocation: in love.
Mary is truly close to us and is our model of faith in

Christian life. She always knew how to say yes to God out of love. Being conceived without original sin is not her merit, but a gift from God; but this does not detract from her being a woman. We are also called to copy her lifestyle as lovers of God. Sometimes Jesus, with his wisdom, his courage, his ability to perform miracles, seems so distant and unreachable to us. Even though we believe in everything he said and feel the desire to follow him, we feel blocked by our sense of inadequacy. Mary, on the other hand, presents an example that we can all follow.

She was conceived immaculate; we became so at the moment of our baptism. At the time of the Annunciation, she struggled to understand; we have had years of catechesis to deal with the same mysteries. She did not know how all things will end up, we know everything about the death and Resurrection of Christ. She carried Jesus in her womb for 9 months; we carry him within us every time we receive communion. She lived with Jesus for 30 years; Jesus said to us: "*I am with you until the end of the ages*," and also: "*Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you have done it to me*."

So, as we do with all the saints, we should not look at her for what she did, nor copy her deeds. Everyone lives in their own time and must respond to the needs of those around them. What we should copy is her ability to focus entirely on God, to love him above all else, to fully trust in his providence and love.

Why did Mary live in this way? and why should we do the same? Saint Paul tells us: "*He destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ."* We are adopted children of God by vocation, which means that we also have all the privileges that Jesus has by his nature, because He gives them to us freely.

Is it possible to remain faithful to such privilege? By our own merits and strength, no, but Jesus obtained this grace for us through his incarnation, death, and resurrection and with it, he also gives us the strength to live it fully. Mary, perhaps, did not understand the theological significance of all this, but through faith, she made it her own and lived it fully; indeed, she made it possible for us too, because, through her yes, the incarnation took place.

There are still many people in the world who do not know their vocation and do not even know the gift that God has given them. It is up to us to become channels of God's grace for them, as Mary was for us. How? By living a life filled with the love of God and allowing God's love to guide all our choices.

The Servant of the Lord

From the Gospel according to Luke (1:26-38):

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Obedience today is much debated. On one side, there are people who defend it staunchly, and on the other, people who think it is outdated.
Don Milani wrote a letter: "Obedience is no longer a virtue"; he was clearly not referring to the religious vow but to a certain type of obedience. He referred to those officers who, during World War II, in the name of military obedience, perpetrated massacres, thus to an obedience that removes all responsibility from the individual for their mistakes and allows them to excuse themselves by saying they had no freedom to choose. This is an obedience that we too do not want.
You might say: if my superiors, parents, boss, ask me to do something beautiful, easy, that I like, then I choose to do it, but I do not think that this is true obedience. If, on the other hand, they ask me to do something I do not like, something against my ideas, does obedience not take away my freedom? And if they ask me to do something I do not understand, something whose consequences I do not know, is that not against freedom too?
Do you think that God, by asking Mary to become a mother, took away her freedom?
We read the passage of the Annunciation. What is Mary's attitude? She is a simple girl, from a humble family in a small village. She has a deep knowledge of God, a knowledge that comes from her spirituality and the

teachings of her family. Girls of that time did not go to school and normally not even to the synagogue, so teachings came from the father and mother, from the traditions expressed in the family, and much, perhaps most, from her personal reflection, prayer, and meditation.

How much did she understand of the angel's message? Surely she understood that she was about to become a mother, that this was God's work, so the work of her betrothed Joseph was not required. I believe that this is what she understood, not much more. She certainly did not understand anything of what would happen to her, of the sufferings, of the persecutions, of Jesus's public life, of his passion and death, of his resurrection. But she said “yes”, an unconditional yes because it was not a yes to the "project" but a yes to God. For the rest, there was trust: "*Let it be done to me according to your word*."

So here is a first point: obedience does not need to understand the meaning of what is asked, but to understand that God is involved. I do not know where I will end up, but if God is there, everything will be fine. I do not know what I will do, but if God is there, He will take care of it. I do not know what it means, but if God is there, it makes no sense to go in the opposite direction. Therefore, obedience is not passivity but transforms into the joy of accepting, of participating.

"And if obeying means losing something, then what happens?" If the purpose of my life is God, then following Him

means losing nothing because my talents were given by God for His work and thus are suitable for doing that, not for going against Him.

Mary is not fatalistic or passive, she asks. Her question does not aim to place a condition or an obstacle but to ask for clarification on how she should act. She does not say, "I cannot become a mother because I have decided to remain a virgin"; what she says is, "I, in my prayer, have understood that God wants me to remain a virgin, and now God asks me to have a son, so in which direction should I move to be sure to do God's will?" As loyalty to God is already given, it is now a matter of understanding the practical details.

This brings us to a second important aspect of obedience: active obedience. There is a film released about 40 years ago in France titled "Je vous salue Marie" (Hail Mary). The atheist director imagines a modern Mary in Paris who faces this sudden request from God. She accepts reluctantly because she cannot go against God. She and Joseph suffer because of it but remain faithful. When the child is born and starts growing up, Mary turns to God and says: I did my part, now please leave me in peace. Naturally, the film was condemned by the Church, but it is an indicator of how modern culture fears God, feels Him as a threat, a usurper of freedom. The Gospel, however, presents us with Mary who, after the announcement, immediately sets in motion: she quickly goes to Elizabeth's house, accompanies Joseph

to Bethlehem despite her condition, works to educate Jesus, protect Him, seek Him, and even when Jesus becomes independent, she follows Him, accompanies Him to the cross; finally, she takes on the heritage of the disciples and stays among them until the end. This is obedience.

It is God's responsibility to decide, but then it becomes entirely my responsibility to act, and I must do my best, even if I am participating in a plan I do not like and for which I had different ideas. There is no true obedience without loyalty because there is no true obedience without freedom.

I believe Mary gave the highest example of obedience not at the moment of the Annunciation but at the foot of the cross. Humanly, she could not accept the death of her Son, but with faith, she is there and in silence adores the will of the Father unfolding in the death of the Son, and she is "lovingly consenting" (this expression I borrowed from John Paul II). She is obedient to the Father by remaining there, dying spiritually with the Son, and is obedient to the Son by accepting to be the Mother of the Church in His name.

Besides, how could she engage in a dangerous journey when she was close to giving birth, how accept giving birth to her son in an unprotected, unadorned place, how risk going down to Egypt, bringing the Son of God to a country of idolaters and foreigners? Nothing was easy or gratifying in Mary's life, but what would have happened if even one of those times she had not obeyed, in the name of common

sense?
Here we find a third point on obedience: obedience as a process of configuration. Her union with God, which makes her embrace the plan, is so deep that she grasps not only the need to be with Him and work for Him, but also to become one with Him also in the desire to reach the goal that the plan proposes. I believe I can say that Mary understood not only that she must accept what God proposes but also understood the infinite love that God has for humanity and thus she too at that moment felt love for humanity and said yes to God so that the plan could be realized and humanity saved. The Mother of God becomes, already here in Nazareth, the spiritual Mother of the Church, which will then be sealed at the foot of the Cross by Jesus's words "Woman, behold your son." This is why Mary is active, because she has become one with God's love for man, and now she loves as God loves, because she felt loved by God first.
We, consecrated people, take the vow of obedience because we love God and seek His will in the decisions of our superiors, but also because we feel part of the congregation and want, through our actions, to make it grow, benefit it, and with it and with God, fulfill God's plan that we call charism.

Maria, Woman of the Magnificat

From the Gospel according to Luke (2:39-56)

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

And Mary said:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.
For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on all ages will call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is from age to age
to those who fear him.
He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.

The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped Israel, his servant,
remembering his mercy,
according to his promise to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

We can clearly see that the text is divided in two parts: the visitation and the canticle of Mary. This passage has been interpreted in many ways because many of its expressions can be used in varied contexts. To avoid errors, let's try to understand the text within its context.

Mary has just learned from the angel that she is to become the mother of the Messiah. She also learned that Elizabeth is pregnant. Both were destined to be childless: Mary by choice, Elizabeth by age and other physical problems. Now both carry the fruit of a miracle in their wombs, and Mary feels the need to share the experience of the miracle. Sharing our experiences of God's love helps us grow and helps those who listen to us grow as well.

The evangelist describes the scene using biblical imagery. Traveling through the hills of Judea carrying the Lord in her womb recalls the second book of Samuel, which talks about the Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets of the law, being carried through the hills of Judah to be

enthroned in Jerusalem. Mary carries something more important through those hills. The tablets were the symbol of the Old Covenant; Jesus is the author of the New Covenant, the new Moses, the new law, and also the new lamb sacrificed to seal this covenant. Hence the litany that calls Mary the "Ark of the New Covenant." Mary enthrones her son in the house of the last priest of the Old Testament to officially begin her son's mission, bridging the New Testament.

The adverb "in haste" does not mean that Mary started running, but that she did not waste time hesitating, she set out immediately, without being influenced by "ifs" or "buts." Did she inform her parents about the angel's visit? Probably, because it would have been difficult to explain how she knew about Elizabeth, and it is normal for a young girl to share important life-changing events at least with her mother. She must have also told them about her pregnancy. Her parents must have been courageous to allow a young girl, in her first pregnancy, to undertake a dangerous journey and stay away from home for three months. Surely Mary has been very determined to convince them.

Mary arrives at Zechariah and Elizabeth's house, and the words of the latter amaze us. No one had told Elizabeth about Mary's situation, and it could not be noticed from the outside because it was too early. The gospel says that Mary's greeting, which in the Jewish world was usually "peace be with you," brings the Holy Spirit upon Elizabeth, who is inspired in what she says, and even causes her child

to leap for joy in her womb. After Easter, when Jesus appears in the Upper Room, he will say, "*Peace be with you! Receive the Holy Spirit*." We, the bearers of the Good News, must recognize that the Spirit is working within us. It often manifests himself through feelings of joy and enthusiasm, what St. Ignatius of Loyola, in the Spiritual Exercises, calls consolation. This Spirit must also be transmitted to others through our message of peace. The word "peace" for the eastern world is never a simple wish or desire but a commitment to the overall well-being of the person to whom it is extended.

Elizabeth is inspired not only to recognize Mary's situation but also to understand its cause. "*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled*." This is what made the miracle possible: faith. Faith is to believe that God is at work and will complete this work, but wants my contribution. Therefore, Mary's faith is not just intellectual and passive but an active faith that turns into a vocation and life commitment. Mary is called "the new Eve." Eve believed the devil's words and brought a curse upon humanity; Mary believed God's words and brought a blessing.

Whose words do we follow? The devil promises personal power ("you will become..."); God promises a fruit for others ("you will bear...").

Mary listens to Elizabeth's words and understands that listeners might get confused: Elizabeth says to Mary: "*Blessed*

are you among women" and then "*the mother of my Lord*." Like all people in the Old Testament, Elizabeth, when recognizing God's presence, feels unworthy and fearful. The confusion that might arise from these words is considering Mary as great, superior and the author of everything. Mary is keen to clarify things and does so in the form of a prayer, not of a theological explanation. Theology is for scholars and the wise; Zechariah could have done it, but she is humble, unlearned, and the unlearned know only how to pray.
It is God who is great; he has done everything, as always. Feeling small before God is not only right but also necessary; however, we must remember that from the Annunciation onwards, the situation has radically changed: God has come close to those who feel small and lifts them up, bringing them to a new dignity. Then the presence of the Lord no longer provokes fear but joy, like John's leap or Mary's exultation. Inner joy and the desire for good are always signs of God's presence and inspiration to respond to his call to love. If joy is always a sign of God's presence, praise becomes a sign of our allegiance to Him. There is no true love without praise. Hence the Magnificat, a song of praise and a prayer born from great, overwhelming joy. The Savior has looked upon her who is small and humble, and has completely changed her status.
We now come to the second part of the text.
The Magnificat begins with the words "*My soul glorifies the Lord...*" Giving glory to God, working for his glory,

opens us to the world. When we work for ourselves or for our own glory, fear and discouragement will soon set in. The disciples, even after hearing that Jesus has risen, shut themselves in the room, for fear of the Pharisees. Mary, instead, goes out to proclaim.

Elizabeth was right to praise her, not for her merit but for the fortune of being chosen as a receptacle of God's grace. The Lord has looked upon her humility. What is humility? Humility and lowliness, bring us to the level of the “humus”, the soil beneath our feet, but also the soil that God used to create homo. From humus, the lowest thing, comes the homo, the prince and guardian of all creation. This is the kind of miracles God performs in us when we allow him to do so, and present ourselves as "servants", people who bow down to do the Master's will. Thus, humility is not about hiding things but recognizing that they are not my merit but a free gift from God.

Let's think for a moment about our attitude, which often works in the opposite way. We hide our talents for fear of being asked too much, for fear of responsibility, for fear of making mistakes, and we delude ourselves that this is humility. If we manage to do something good, then we immediately seek praise and appreciation from others.

Mary accepts her mission with humility and is not afraid, because she knows that the Lord "has shown strength with his arm". In the Old Testament, God defeated enemies, making them perish in the Red Sea, etc., now, in the New

Covenant, his arm is extended to the sinner and he says: "*Love your enemies*."

Elizabeth had said "Blessed," and Mary repeats this word, broadening its scope: "*All generations will call me blessed*." All generations, not just Elizabeth, because the Lord's plan is never a private plan. Remember that the author of this gospel is Luke, and this same word is used by him for the Beatitudes in chapter 6. You know well that Matthew in chapter 5 has 8+1 Beatitudes with a slightly more generic and spiritual approach: "*blessed are the poor in spirit*," while Luke in chapter 6 has only 3+1 Beatitudes followed by 3+1 woes which are their exact opposite. In Luke, these words are referred to very concrete situations: "*Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven. For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way*."

Furthermore, we have other phrases: Luke 7:20 "*Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me*." Luke 10:23 "*Blessed are the eyes that see what you see*." Luke 11:27 "*Blessed is the womb that bore you*," to which Jesus replies: "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of my*

Father and obey it." Luke 12:37,45 "*Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find awake.*" What makes a person blessed? Poverty? Hunger? No! It is the presence of God, the fact that the person recognizes and accepts his situation and listens to God's word. When the person opens his heart to God, then He directly intervenes on his behalf and changes his situation, while the rich, believing themselves self-sufficient and fortunate, refuse His intervention. Thus, the words of the Magnificat: "*He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.*" Do you see the parallel? Be careful not to refer these words only to material things because otherwise, you fall into the error of those who criticize God for those situations that seem not to change: an innocent person suffering, a child dying, hunger, war, etc. God can provide the material solution and sometimes He does it, but that is not the most important and significant thing in beatitude, otherwise faith is betrayed and the final beatitude loses its value: "*Blessed are you when people insult you,* etc.". If God is simply a miracle maker, then the cross of Christ loses its meaning; but if the true meaning of our relationship with him lies in recognizing his presence even in situations of suffering, then the beatitudes tells us that in that moment we become companions of Christ on the cross.

The word "blessed" as used by Mary in the Magnificat, is

perhaps deeper than in chapter 6, because here Mary states the reason for this divine intervention. She says: "*Remembering His mercy*." God is rich in mercy. You know that the word "mercy", in the Bible refers to the womb of the mother (Rahma). Everything is in God's hands, and His hands are those of the "mother" who takes care of that child who has just emerged from her womb. He, on the one hand, already has a life of his own and has the right to his independence, but on the other hand, he still needs everything. God's protection is not an imposition with arrogance, superiority, but with love that becomes service, humility, respect.

Mary, the faithful servant of God, loves all His children and, if she has to make choices, she chooses those who are most in need, putting all her fervor as a mother into it.

Who knows if Mary thought about these things while she was at the foot of the cross. She understands that the Father cannot intervene to save the life of the Son because He has freely chosen to die as a servant who gives his life for those who are betraying him. Who is truly in need is not Jesus, who is fulfilling the "*will of the Father*," but those who crucify Him because they are still resisting mercy and forgiveness.

This is the mercy of God the Father/Mother towards those who fear Him. Those who "fear" Him, not those who are "afraid." As we have already explained, those who live with the Lord cannot be afraid, but know that God is so great, being with Him is so beautiful that there is the fear of losing

Him, of being without Him.
He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. We said that "homo" comes from "humus" and that God has lifted us up, but, as if that were not enough, man always tries to elevate himself above everything, above others and even above God. He foolishly seeks, in his own way, what God has already given him, and does not find it. Nowadays, everything is "more": the newest car, faster, more beautiful, more ... more ... more, and confusion reigns; there are no more certainties, one does not know where to orient oneself anymore. The Magnificat restores the original order, allowing God to set things right. Man is great because God made him, not for the things he has or has made himself. He is important because God makes him important, not because he is better than others. He is strong because God gives him strength with love and mercy, not because he fights. He is satisfied because his food is to do the will of God, not because he has plenty of bread.
One final detail: The verbs in Mary's song are not in the future, like in a promise. They are all in the past. This does not mean that everything is gone, but that it has already been fully obtained and is still fully present as a reality.
How can we follow Mary's teaching?
We must live an active, joyful life, contacting others with humility to share with them our experience of God, our being chosen by Him, being the receptacle and instrument of His wonders, "*for Holy is His name*."

Mary, The Mother of God

From the Gospel according to Luke (2:1-19)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."
When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."
So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.
When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child.
All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.

The mother of the Almighty is presented in the gospel as a simple woman, a woman of listening, a woman of faith, a woman of presence. Allow me to clarify these four words.
A Simple Woman: She, the daughter of a humble family from a humble village in Galilee, lives the daily life of all the women of her land and time. What makes Mary different? Her faith, her spiritual union with God, with His plan, which makes it possible for God to speak to her through the angel, first, but then also through the shepherds, Simeon, and finally Jesus himself. The shepherds are also simple people. They feel the call to go to the stable, and they go; the other inhabitants of Bethlehem who had closed their doors to Mary and Joseph do not go to the stable. The magi go there following a star, King Herod does not go but sends

his soldiers. And us? Do we go to the stable?

A Woman of Listening. This is an attitude closely linked to the previous one. At any moment Mary could have spoken, explained, yet we always see her intent on listening, reflecting, and she says few words. She asks the angel for guidance, with Elizabeth, she limits herself to praying, she says nothing to the shepherds, not even to Simeon, she asks Jesus in the temple for explanations and then listens. Listening is quite different from understanding. It is treasuring in the heart to reflect and pray. Important people are too busy celebrating, always immersed in noise; they have no time to meditate. Mary has plenty of time, time to dedicate to God because this reflection gives value to all other times. We are used to celebrating Christmas with plenty of lights, colors, music, parties. Have we got some time to stop and pray in silence? I am not talking about Mass, which you all attend faithfully, but moments of intimacy between you and God, to reflect on your life, your family, and see it in union with Him in the light of His plan.

A Woman of Faith. In the three episodes in which Mary meets the shepherds, Simeon, and is in the temple, it is clearly stated that She and Joseph did not understand anything but she kept these things, pondering them in her heart. She lives by faith; does not clearly understand where God wants to take her, but she knows that if God guides her, she must trust and go forward. Then she becomes a woman of presence. Faith is knowing how to distinguish

between understanding things in themselves, that is, in their human, historical reasons, or understanding that they have a different meaning when seen from God's point of view. From a human point of view, there is nothing normal about Christmas, despite all society's efforts to make it a normal, controllable holiday. Have you ever wondered why there is an increasing tendency to remove Christ, the stable, any sign of poverty and persecution, and replace them with Santa Claus, gifts, concerts, and vacations? Christmas is a holiday that scares those who have no faith.

A Woman of Presence: Mary has a constant presence in Jesus' life: presence as a mother, presence as an obedient daughter of God, presence as a teacher who teaches Jesus the basics of life and presence as a disciple who learns from Jesus' life the plan of God. She could have rebelled against those who captured Jesus, could have cried out their mistake, yet she is there silent at the foot of the cross, united with her Son, united with God's plan of salvation. Even with the disciples locked in the upper room, she could have explained everything, but she is there among them and with them receives the Holy Spirit. Presence is a constancy in faith and practice, in moments of joy as in those of suffering, in easy ones as in difficult ones, at the manger, in front of the stable or at Calvary. Christ is the true God not only when He performs miracles or preaches but also when He is in the humility of the stable or on the cross.

These four attitudes make Mary the mother of Jesus, the

mother of God, the mother of all the faithful, the mother of the Church.

In Bethlehem. Mary, Eucharistic Woman.

Following what was discussed in the previous chapter, I want to present a particular aspect of Christmas. Incarnation and Death/Resurrection are the two pillars of Christian faith, and Mary is present in both moments, with an active presence. We have always learned that the Eucharist is the sacrament that renews the sacrifice of Calvary where Christ offers Himself entirely for us. Now, we see how it is also closely connected with the mystery of the Incarnation where Christ becomes truly present among us.

At the moment of the Annunciation, Mary could not have imagined how the story would unfold. Now in Bethlehem, this mystery begins to reveal itself.

It begins with the rejection by the people. Jesus is rejected by the people and taken outside the walls of Jerusalem to be crucified. Mary and Joseph experienced the people's rejection: “there was no room for them in the houses”, and had to settle for a stable outside the village. The suffering of rejection and lack of comfort accompanies Jesus from the beginning.

"*And Mary gave birth to her son*," she makes Him present, a true presence in flesh and blood, and lays Him in the manger, in the place of food. First of all, remember that Bethlehem means "house of bread," and note that the word

manger is repeated three times in a few lines. Someone as meticulous as Luke in his writing couldn't have done this by chance. Repeating a word is a sign that he wanted to convey a message. Mary fills the empty basket of a hungry humanity with the bread of life. That humanity hungry for God, which for centuries had been praying and imploring God for the coming of the Messiah, is now receiving an answer to its hunger, but an answer that will be manifested in the Upper Room and fulfilled on Calvary. The Eucharist is the sacrament where food becomes the true flesh and blood of Christ, and Christ becomes true food placed on the table to be eaten. Jesus says: "*Take and eat; this is my body offered in sacrifice for you*."

Why a manger for animals? Precisely because humanity, hungry, rejected Him, but the world still welcomes Him. Rejected by the people, welcomed by the shepherds and the magi. Why the shepherds? Remember that in Jewish society shepherds were the lowest caste, because, living with the flock, they had no time to communicate with the rest of society, no time to go to the synagogue, etc. When Jesus calls Himself "*The Good Shepherd*," He uses an image that seems romantic to us, "pastoral," but for the Jews it, it was horrible. So, they were the last, always moving in search of pastures for their animals. Love is for those who are in motion, continuously going out of themselves to seek what is best for the people entrusted to them. Mary and Joseph had to set out for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem; they had to set

out to go up to Jerusalem, the place of God, the temple, to go to Egypt and bring Jesus even to the pagans; finally, to return to Nazareth. The shepherds also have to go to Bethlehem to meet Jesus and then return full of joy, as do the Magi. The only ones who remain quietly at home are the inhabitants of Bethlehem, who refused to welcome Jesus, and Herod, who have sought to kill Him. Jesus is also continually on the move through the roads of Galilee and Judea, meeting people and benefiting them, rejected by the Pharisees and welcomed by sinners. Saint Luke describes Jesus' descent to Jerusalem to be crucified, as a long journey that covers almost half of his Gospel. One cannot love and remain closed at home or "in the sacristy," as Don Orione would say, and as Pope Francis repeats. If we remain in the comfort of our homes, sooner or later we will feel compelled to make those compromises that gradually kill Christ in us.

After His birth, Jesus is condemned to death by the authority: Herod who is afraid of him, just like Pilate who hands Him over to the crowd to be crucified.

All the episodes of the birth, according to the careful description of the two evangelists, recall the mystery of the sacred Triduum with the Eucharist at its center. Mary is the first priest of this.

After the consecration, the bread that is not consumed is placed in the tabernacle; sometimes a minister keeps one or two pieces in a pyx to bring it to the sick. Mary, the living

tabernacle, who kept the body of Christ for nine months, goes to bring Jesus to Elizabeth, who, without knowing it, needs Him. Once again, love sets out on his mission.

After looking at the outward aspect, that is, what Mary was instrumental in, we must also look at her human dimension and her inner life. How does Mary live the mystery of God becoming a man through her? At the announcement of the angel, when she understands that she must receive Christ within her, she says "fiat," the "amen" we say when we approach communion. It is a declaration not only of faith in what is happening, but above all of availability. From that moment on, Mary adopts an attitude of availability and adoration. When we receive the Body of Christ at the communion, we say “amen”. It is a commitment to be available to His plan, a plan that will unfold during the day and throughout life in unimaginable, often absurd ways, all important for the salvation of men.

I want now to reflect on a word we normally use for the Eucharist: Adoration. Mary, not only adopts an active attitude, but also an adoring one that allows her to take care of God's work, and avoid ruining it with any false protagonism devoid of humility. In all the things that were happening, she could have put herself forward, gloried in it, and she would have had every right to do so. She lives, instead, with humility, silence, and adoration.

In the Gospel of Luke, there are three particularly illuminating phrases in this regard:

- 2:19 "*Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart*." We are in Bethlehem when the shepherds came to see the child and tell of the angels. Mary could have confirmed their stories by recounting her encounter with the angel. Instead, no. She remains in silence, prays, and treasures their words. Until a few moments before, Jesus Himself was inside her; now she begins to fill herself with His life. The tabernacle does not remain empty but fills up for the moment when she will be called to deliver this treasure to the disciples after Jesus' ascension to heaven.
- 2:33 "*The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Him*." Here we are in the temple. They have listened to the words of Simeon and Anna. They are not two officials of the temple but two pious worshipers. Mary could have given them a word of confirmation as well, but she limits herself to marveling. The discovery of Christ and the unfolding of His mystery is always new, every day requiring us to approach it with "wonder." Wonder is not always the result of amazement at something beautiful, as the shepherds had after the angels' announcement, but can be the result of facing something difficult to accept, painful, challenging, whose meaning we do not understand. Remember, among other things, that Simeon prophesies to Mary the sword that will pierce her soul.
- 2:48 "*When they saw Him, they were astonished... they did not understand what He was saying to them... His mother treasured all these things in her heart*." Here we

are again in the temple but 12 years later. The subject before them is Jesus Himself, and once again, what has happened is something strange and different. Here Mary expresses her and Joseph's concern. Faced with Jesus' disconcerting response that reminds them they are only instruments, facilitators, Mary once again adopts an attitude of wonder, listening, and reflection: she treasures these things.

The document Vita Consecrata, at number 38, says: "The call to holiness can only be accepted and cultivated in silence and adoration."

Considering that Mary is relatively little spoken of, the fact that this attitude is emphasized three times means it is important. These passages are then parallel to Luke 8:20: "*My mother and my brothers are those who listen to the word of God and put it into practice*." Now you understand that at that moment, Jesus words were not meant to reject His Mother's request, but to honor her.

Therefore, at Jesus' birth, many events could have made Mary a star. She lives them with wonder and reflection, a heart dedicated to meditating on events. Her habitual attitude is silence and listening. We have few words of Mary in the Gospel, and they are all directed to God or the angel. In the Magnificat, she speaks to Elizabeth but to glorify God.

Even in difficult moments (Joseph's doubt, Simeon's prophecy, Calvary), Mary does not ask for explanations, does not complain, does not give explanations to others.

Her attitude is to meditate, listen, and offer. She has a close relationship with God, not with facts or men. She keeps her heart pure from the temptations of discouragement and despair. She leaves room for faith, which is the only answer to doubts.

Jesus Himself is the master of silence. He, who spent the years of His ministry preaching, prepared himself in the silence of the house of Nazareth for thirty years. Before beginning His apostolic life, He withdrew into the desert for forty days; before choosing the 12 apostles, He spent the night in prayer; before teaching how to pray, He was found in a secluded place praying; before starting the discourse on the bread of life, the most important and the hardest among those in the Gospel of John, at the end of which it is written that many left Him, He spent the night in prayer; and before the Passion, He withdrew to Gethsemane to pray.

Inner silence is the characteristic of every Christian who wants to better understand Christ.

We are called upon to bring Christ to others: How can we do that if we do not know Him? We are called to dispense God's love, but what love do we dispense if we have not experienced and assimilated it ourselves?

Our reflection is thus based on these three elements:

We must set out, leave ourselves behind, draw near to those in need, go where we know we can encounter Christ.

In every moment of life, we must place ourselves in

adoration, which means listening and wondering, but also recognizing that in everything that happens, there is a provocation from God for us.

Like Mary, we must make Christ present to give Him to others. People approach us with their problems, and we must give them Christ, the only one who can satisfy them.

Mary, Woman of the Journey

From the Gospel according to Luke (2:41-50):

> Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom.
> After they had completed their days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.
> Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him.
> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.
> When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.”
> And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them."

You are well aware that in Jewish society, women were confined to the house: first under the authority of their father, then as adolescents under that of their husband, and if they

were widowed, under that of their sons. It was rare for them to leave the house except to draw water from the well and for other domestic needs such as buying food or tending the livestock. Yet, in the Gospel, we see Mary always in motion. We have already seen the historical-salvific importance of her journey to Elizabeth; then the journey to Bethlehem because the Messiah had to be born in the city of David; then the ascent to Jerusalem for the circumcision and presentation at the temple because Jesus had to be a full member of his people; then the flight to Egypt so that even foreign nations would be blessed by the visit of the Redeemer; then the return to Nazareth, to the normality of a peripheral village; then the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus, now 12 years old, becomes aware of his mission in service of the Father; then traveling around Galilee accompanying her son to emphasize her union in the redemptive mission; finally, the last journey to Jerusalem and the ascent to Calvary to share to the very end the mission of her son.

I would like to dwell a bit on the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. This is a very important moment because it marks a transitional moment for the entire family. Up to the age of twelve, the boy was considered a child and under the protection/authority of the mother who had to instruct him in the basics of human living. After twelve years, he was considered an adult, capable of being integrated into society, and it became the father's task to train him to be a true and faithful son of the religion and society.

He could begin to participate in synagogue functions, political discussions, work, and move about independently. Jesus seemed to take all these things in stride, without waiting for instruction from his father, Joseph, which is why, when he stayed behind in Jerusalem, they were taken aback as if Jesus wanted to escape. When they asked Him why He behaved this way, He replied that He must now be about the things of "His Father," referring to another Father, the one in heaven. For parents, it is always hard to see that their children are no longer those obedient, needy little creatures who require their protection and affection, but are now rebellious adolescents claiming freedom, spaces, and even a certain emotional independence. It is not just a moment of change and growth for the boy, but also for the parents who must learn a new way of being "family." We think of so many mothers and fathers who chain their children's affections to themselves, not allowing them to grow up. At forty, these men are still attached to their mother's skirts. Nothing of this sort for the Holy Family. That one-day journey from Jerusalem, the following three days for the return and the fruitless search, represent a path of purification for Mary and Joseph; they are a prelude to the ascent to Calvary and the three days in the tomb until they find Him a new man, the man of the Resurrection. Here Mary and Joseph make the leap in quality in being servants of the Most High.

We have said that Mary is always in motion and that each

journey has a theological significance in the plan of world salvation. Redemption is the fruit of God's love for us, and love cannot stand still.

However, each journey brings uncertainties: which path to take? Where will it lead? What dangers lie along the way? When will we return? Every journey involves struggles: there were no airplanes, trains, or cars. One must leave the daily routine, set aside our little world built with many sacrifices, the things that make us feel safe and comfortable, our duties. There are many reasons to say no and remain closed in the small world of our home.

Mary has no comforts to cling to, and her primary responsibility is to do the will of God as a faithful servant. A servant cannot remain still, cannot remain idle; the master does not allow it. But Mary, who indeed calls herself a servant, is much more than a servant because "*the servant does not know what his master is doing*." She is involved body, mind, and heart, a servant for love or better yet, a mother. Mothers too, are never still. Don Orione, when speaking of his mother, has a beautiful passage. He describes her as the shuttle on the loom that runs always to the right and left, a woman always at work who knew how to be a mother and somewhat a father too, since his father Vittorio was often away for work. It is the diligence of one who strives to make everything go well so that those entrusted to her care lack nothing and suffer nothing.

Those who are always in motion cannot be attached to

material things; they learn to make careful calculations of what is truly useful or necessary for the journey and what is not; those who must take a plane and decide what to pack if the weight limit is restricted know it well.

Those driven by love do not fear the unknown, the future, the risks, or rather, they fear them but do not let that fear stop them. Mary does not look so much at the destination; she looks at the journey itself because Jesus is the "Way," so the encounter is already in the journey itself. This is an aspect worth delving into to avoid the abstract idealism of those who fixate on the commitment to prepare for the final meeting with the Lord but do not notice, and therefore do not take advantage of the presence of Jesus along the way. The union with Jesus is not a goal to be reached after our death. He is already a living and present reality, an "already and not yet," as is said in theology.

Looking at the Gospel of the visit to Elizabeth, Pope Francis declares Mary as the model of missions. What makes Mary a model missionary? The Pope says that it is the fact that immediately after receiving the angel's announcement, she did not keep God's gift for herself but immediately set out to share it. She transformed her being chosen into concrete service, into gestures of love, small but concrete.

On the other hand, John Paul II says: "*Like the apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room "together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14), in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength*

and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We too, like the apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit.

On the eve of the third millennium the whole Church is invited to live more intensely the mystery of Christ by gratefully cooperating in the work of salvation. The Church does this together with Mary and follows the example of Mary, the Church's Mother and model: Mary is the model of that maternal love which should inspire all who cooperate in the Church's apostolic mission for the rebirth of humanity. Therefore, "strengthened by the presence of Christ, the Church journeys through time toward the consummation of the ages and goes to meet the Lord who comes. But on this journey ...she proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary." (Redemptoris Missio 92)

Those who feel sent by God, and all the religious are so, are faced with two possibilities: The first is represented by two questions: "Where?" and "What?" The second is represented by the two questions: "Why?" and "For whom?"

Asking ourselves "where" makes us wonder: where will I go, will I like the place, will I face difficulties (food, climate, language) etc.; asking "what" makes us wonder: what will I do there, will I be capable, will I be satisfied, will I have all the things I need? These are selfish positions because they focus on things and on ourselves, with attention based on satisfying our desires and tendencies.

Asking ourselves "why," instead, places the goal of our mandate, the vocation itself, at the center. Asking ourselves "for whom," places the sender, God, and the recipients, those in need, at the center.

So we are obliged to go out of ourselves, and "where" and "what" become important details, but are never in the foreground.

We have seen the Magnificat where Mary places God at the center, His plan and His action, and then herself as a humble servant inserted into the plan, finding true happiness in it: "*from now on all generations will call me blessed*."

Pope Benedict XVI in Deus Caritas Est (41-42) says: "*Outstanding among the saints is Mary, Mother of the Lord and mirror of all holiness. In the Gospel of Luke we find her engaged in a service of charity to her cousin Elizabeth, with whom she remained for "about three months" (1:56) so as to assist her in the final phase of her pregnancy. "Magnificat anima mea Dominum", she says on the occasion of that visit, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk 1:46). In these words she expresses her whole program of life: not setting herself at the centre, but leaving space for God, who is encountered both in prayer and in service of neighbor — only then does goodness enter the world. Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself. She is lowly: her only desire is to be the handmaid of the Lord (cf. Lk 1:38, 48). She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation of the world if, rather*

than carrying out her own projects, she places herself completely at the disposal of God's initiatives. Mary is a woman of hope: only because she believes in God's promises and awaits the salvation of Israel, can the angel visit her and call her to the decisive service of these promises. Mary is a woman of faith: "Blessed are you who believed", Elizabeth says to her (cf. Lk 1:45). The Magnificat — a portrait, so to speak, of her soul — is entirely woven from threads of Holy Scripture, threads drawn from the Word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the Word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the Word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God. Since Mary is completely imbued with the Word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate. Finally, Mary is a woman who loves. How could it be otherwise? As a believer who in faith thinks with God's thoughts and wills with God's will, she cannot fail to be a woman who loves. We sense this in her quiet gestures, as recounted by the infancy narratives in the Gospel. We see it in the delicacy with which she recognizes the needs of the spouses at Cana and makes it known to Jesus. We see it in the humility with which she recedes into the background during Jesus' public life, knowing that the Son must establish a new family and that the Mother's hour

will come only with the Cross, which will be Jesus' true hour (cf. Jn 2:4; 13:1). When the disciples flee, Mary will remain beneath the Cross (cf. Jn 19:25-27); later, at the hour of Pentecost, it will be they who gather around her as they wait for the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14).

The lives of the saints are not limited to their earthly biographies but also include their being and working in God after death. In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them. In no one do we see this more clearly than in Mary. The words addressed by the crucified Lord to his disciple—to John and through him to all disciples of Jesus: "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:27)—are fulfilled anew in every generation. Mary has truly become the Mother of all believers. Men and women of every time and place have recourse to her motherly kindness and her virginal purity and grace, in all their needs and aspirations, their joys and sorrows, their moments of loneliness and their common endeavours. They constantly experience the gift of her goodness and the unfailing love which she pours out from the depths of her heart. The testimonials of gratitude, offered to her from every continent and culture, are a recognition of that pure love which is not self- seeking but simply benevolent. At the same time, the devotion of the faithful shows an infallible intuition of how such love is possible: it becomes so as a result of the most intimate union with God, through which the soul is

totally pervaded by him—a condition which enables those who have drunk from the fountain of God's love to become in their turn a fountain from which "flow rivers of living water" (Jn 7:38). Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and its constantly renewed power. To her, we entrust the Church and her mission in the service of love.

Mary in the service of Humanity

From the Gospel of John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washing, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it.

And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now."

Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.

Those who read this passage from the Gospel of John without knowledge of its theology, may easily fall into interpretive errors. Let it be clear from the beginning that the

purpose of this passage is not to show that Mary is capable of changing Jesus' mind and advancing the timing of his ministry.

This passage from the Gospel of John is highly symbolic, and to understand it, one must pay attention to every word and detail.

The setting presented is that of a wedding, the wedding between God and humanity, a figure often used in the Old Testament, especially by the prophets, to describe the special relationship between God and His people and the covenant sealed on Mount Sinai. The Bible begins by saying that Adam needs a companion with whom to share life, and ends with the book of Revelation speaking about the wedding of the New Jerusalem with the lamb.

What were the terms of the covenant sealed on mount Sinai? God had just given the two tablets with the Ten Commandments, and consequently, all the regulations that fill the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy arose. This law was primarily based on the rites to be performed and the words to be said. At that moment, there is the sealing of the covenant with the killing of the lamb and God's words: "*If you observe these laws that I give you, you will be my people, and I will be your God and will bless you for a thousand generations*." Unfortunately, looking at Israel's experience, we see that the law does not work as it should. The people immediately begin to rebel and betray God, from the golden calf to all the revolts that

led them to wander for forty years in the desert. Even after entering the promised land, the history will be a continuous alternation of obedience-blessing with betrayals marked by wars, destructions, and even a second exile.

Why this infidelity? Because man is by nature unstable and a transgressor. Even for those who obeyed, like many in Jesus' time, the covenant had become inefficient because the observance had turned into pure ritualism: a marriage where the flame of love that had brought husband and wife together no longer existed; or, to use another image, a feast where there is no more wine, another symbol of divine blessing throughout the Old Testament. Water is the symbol of creation, the symbol of the necessity of life, along with bread. Wine, on the other hand, is the symbol of abundance, joy, and celebration.

Mary, who had introduced into the world the One who is to establish the new covenant, now urges him to begin this renewal. "They have no more wine," a prompt invitation to start doing something.

In our passage, Mary is presented, first of all, as the Mother of Jesus. She is the new Eve, the mother of the new man who brings the salvation broken by the first mother of the living, Eve. Humanity, from the beginning, wanted to seize what belongs to God and committed the original sin; they cannot save themselves, but, thanks to the offspring of the new woman, can remember God's words to the serpent: "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, between*

your offspring and hers; he will crush your head". Now they receive, by grace, the salvation that they could not take on their own. Jesus understands the symbolism suggested by his mother's phrase and reinforces it by responding, "*What is there between us, woman*?" Woman, yes, like Eve the woman. So what is the relationship between the new man, Jesus, and the new woman, Mary? Jesus' phrase is not a reproach for the intrusion or a refusal to help, but a reminder of the covenant that unites them: the relationship of full sharing in the service of the Father's salvific plan. Even after the original sin, the angel announces that salvation will come from the alliance between a woman and her son. It would not have made sense for Jesus to say no and then change his mind to obey his mother.

Only Jesus can perform this miracle because it involves radically changing the terms of the old covenant, but the terms of a covenant can only be changed if both parties agree. It requires a man who is also God, who represents both parties, Jesus, the God-man. But since the covenant had already begun in the earthly paradise and was broken by the father and mother of all humanity, it is now renewed with all humanity, not just Israel.

Jesus continues: "*My hour has not yet come*." This covenant is not something that changes on the spur of the moment. And when is this hour? Following the theology of John, we need to jump to chapters 12 and 13. On 12:26, already during the holy week Jesus exclaims: *"The hour has*

come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Then at 13:1, at the beginning of the last Supper, John says: "*Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.*" This is where the change happens, on Calvary. Mary is asking for an anticipation of the passion.

What are the symbols of this connection? Many:

1) The passage begins by saying: "*On the third day*," that is, the day of the Resurrection, but in the previous chapter, it was said: the next day, three times (1:29;35;43), which makes seven (1+1+1+1+3), the week of creation, or rather the new creation regenerated precisely by the Resurrection.

2) "*There were six stone jars*." Six, the number that in the Bible represents evil, that is, the one who wants to reach God's perfection (7) on his own, but never succeeds. It is also the number of man, created on the sixth day, who wanted to be like God and fell into sin. Stone jars, cold and rigid like the two tablets of the law. Jars for ritual purification, the main rites of this old law that had the task of making us worthy to be in God's presence. Empty jars, because they are now incapable of generating life.

Mary urges the servants, representatives of the old covenant, to change: "*Do whatever he tells you.*" It is the obedience of faith that makes change possible if one is willing to put into play what one has. The first covenant, that of Sinai, was sealed precisely by this phrase: "*Everything the*

Lord has said, we will do."
Jesus says: "*Fill them with water and draw some out* (wine)." Here is the change. The law, if regenerated by faith and then offered, begins to give life again.
Curiously: It is not Jesus who performs the miracle but the servants; they pour the water and then draw the wine. There are no formulas or gestures of Jesus. After all, it is the same with all the miracles of our saints and even of Mary, they perform the actions, but it is God who performs the miracle using their faith. And if this is true, all of us can also be instruments of miracles.
The water is placed in empty jars; Jesus does not discard the law and the old rites; he renews them, gives them life again. He does not want them to be lived with coldness, with a sense of obligation, but he wants them to be lived with joy and desire.
But for Jesus, what does the change symbolize? Let's go back to chapter 13. "*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end*," and then what does he do? He also takes the water of purification and pours it, but a slave does washing the feet of the master. He who is the Master washes the feet of his disciples, or as he will say, "Friends." This is the change that the obedience of faith must lead to, pure love that becomes service. The wine of Cana foreshadows the wine of the Last Supper, the blood of Christ shed for us, love to the end.
Mary, an element of union and passage between the Old

and New Testaments, becomes a means of transition from ritualism to love, through faith, a love that, to be true, is chosen with desire and joy: "*I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you*."

It is interesting to see that immediately after the episode at Cana, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, and there we have the episode of the cleansing of the temple; he drives out the merchants, overturns the tables with the things necessary for the sacrifices of the Old Testament, and says: "*Do not make my Father's house a market place*," and then adds a sign: "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days*," and John adds, "*He was speaking of his body*." He is the sacrificed lamb, the only possible sacrifice for the new covenant to come into effect.

What are the new terms of the covenant? "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you: remain in my love. ... I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.*"

Another proof of these connections: Read chapters 3 and 4 of John. In chapter 3, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus and practically explains what happened at Cana. Here are the main phrases:

3:5: "*Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*." The need for a new covenant is now satisfied in the Sacraments.

3:14-15: "*And just as Moses lifted up* the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone*

who believes in him may have eternal life." Redemption is at the center of the Covenant.

3:16-18: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*." Faith and the promise of divine sonship.

In chapter 4, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, and after talking about the water of life, he talks about the temple: 4:21-24 "*Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth*."

Where was Mary during the banquet of the Last Supper? I don't know, probably in the kitchen preparing everything, but the next day, at the foot of the Cross, she is there. After all, we cannot think that at Cana she was present as a guest. Women were not invited to banquets with men. Surely the

newlyweds were relatives of Mary, and she, with other women, was in the kitchen making sure everything was ready. She always lived in charity, humility and hiding.

One last point. Jesus says to the servants: "*Now draw some out and take it.*" The emphasis is on that "now." Not before being filled with the Word of God, not after, but now. Faith is lived in the present, and miracles are a response to the present.

What is Mary's teaching for us who are immersed in a world increasingly marked, on one side by indifference to spiritual matters, and on the other by ritualism? People go to Mass and receive the Sacraments thinking they have thus done their duty and that this is enough.

Mary's three attitudes at Cana are:

1. Concern for the needs of others. She notices the need and feels involved in doing something. But this attitude is possible only if one looks at others with the loving eyes of a mother, to see the real problem, the underlying one, not just the external manifestation. This is our vocation: to bring people to Christ. True charity is bringing God to men and men to God.
2. Prayer. She presents the needs of these her children to Christ. She knows that her Son is the only one who can solve the problem at its root. If we do not bring our poor into our prayers, we will not be able to understand them well or understand God's plan for them.
3. Faith. She teaches those in need, the servants, the

importance of believing: “Do whatever He tells you”, encouraging them to respond with generosity and readiness even if what Jesus tells us is not what we would have expected. The fruit of prayer does not mean that God answers our requests but that we learn to conform to (accept) God's will.

4. I said three, not because I had forgotten a point but because this is the summary of all three previous points, and that is love. Concern for those in need, prayer, and faith, only work done with makes possible and true the new covenant between God and us. Mary is not sitting idly by; she is active, provokes Jesus, urges the servants, and sets an example.

In this lost humanity, who realizes the real needs of others? Who will be able to point out the right path to the solution? Who will support people in their doubts, perplexities, weaknesses that prevent them from abandoning themselves to God's love, when instead they would like to cling to the small certainties that make them feel right?

Mary, the co-redeemer.

From the Gospel of John 19:25-30

> Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.
> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.
> After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst." There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is accomplished." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.

Let us now consider Mary under the title of "Co-Redeemer". This title indicates the contribution made by Mary to the plan of redemption. Naturally, redemption is a gift of God and the exclusive work of Christ through His death and resurrection, but as with all things, He shares his work with us, humans, as much as possible. He wants to involve us in His plan because it is a plan of love, and love can never be one-sided, even if it is total love. In fact, precisely because it is total love, it involves the beloved in everything.
We are all called to participate in this plan through our sacrifices, our love, and our good work. These three have

redemptive value not in themselves but by virtue of their union with Christ, to whom they lead us. This is what is commonly referred to as the treasury of the Church, on which indulgences, prayers for the souls in purgatory, etc., are based. Remember the phrase of St. Paul: "*I complete in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions*."

Our salvation is never just an individual issue; we are all parts of the mystical body of Christ. So, if love is important, those who have loved the most will have played a more significant role.

Calling Mary "Co-Redeemer" is the consequence of everything we have said in the previous chapters. Who is Mary? She was chosen by God to become the mother of Jesus and, as such, became the Mother of God. She responded to this call with a humble but firm and irrevocable "yes" at the Annunciation, and from that moment, she began a journey alongside Jesus to give Him life, protect Him, educate Him, instruct Him, and then to follow Him, learn from Him, and share everything with Him. Think of the thirty years spent together with Jesus: it created a union of hearts, a sharing of views, of intent, of mission. Think of the education she gave Him, the care, the daily work, the being together, the union in difficult moments, such as when Joseph died. It was a journey of growth in faith. Perhaps the most challenging moment was accepting that Jesus would take His own path, because, in a certain sense, this meant a

separation and a journey towards that destiny which would cause the sword to pierce her heart.

Did Mary feel fear? Certainly, as a woman and also as a mother, and she would have taught Jesus to be afraid. It is an important human feeling: fear of danger, fear of suffering, both her own and her son's. Without fear, there is no faith, no love. Faith does not erase human weaknesses but gives the strength to overcome them. Fear could paralyze us, prevent us from acting; then it remains human and is negative. Alternatively, it can become a source of faith and abandonment in God. In the previous chapter, we said that at Cana Mary invited Jesus to embark on His path, and He, with the phrase "*What is there between us, woman*?" reminded her that they would be profoundly united in this journey, a plan that began at the gates of the earthly paradise. Mary lived that moment with some fear, which gives even more value to her gesture.

The gospel we read at the beginning of the chapter is the continuation of the one about Cana. It is still John writing; these are the only two times he mentions Mary and again calls her "Woman." Think about it. John does not speak of the Annunciation, nor the episodes related to the birth or childhood of Jesus, but only of Cana and the cross, despite being the one who lived with Mary after the Resurrection: "*and the disciple took her into his home*."

This is the hour spoken of at Cana, and Mary, the woman, the mother, is there with the son to crush the serpent's head.

How does she participate? What is her role? John Paul II, in the encyclical Redemptoris Mater, uses this expression: "*suffering deeply with her only-begotten Son and joining herself with her maternal spirit to his sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the victim to whom she had given birth," in this way Mary "faithfully preserved her union with her Son even to the Cross.*" (see also LG58).

To suffer with the suffering Christ, to accept this suffering with love. Suffering because it is dictated by the union of love, but acceptance because faith tells her that this is the path chosen by God for the salvation of many, including those who at that moment are the primary cause of this suffering. Here, the mystery of suffering unfolds. Christ on the cross suffers partly because His body suffers: the wounds, the body losing its capacity to endure, etc. But, He also and above all suffers because He sees that at that moment, when He is offering everything to save everyone, there are people who perhaps will not achieve this salvation because they stubbornly reject His love.

Mary is co-redemptrix only if she enters into the mystery of this second suffering of Christ, the most intimate, the deepest, which only she, having shared in the Son's plan over many years of closeness and sharing, can understand. It is suffering not in itself but for the plan of salvation. Thus, when the Son entrusts humanity to her, "*Woman* (collaborator of the plan), *here is your son*," she takes upon herself the care that none of the gift her Son is making at that

moment is lost, that as many as possible accept the redemptive passion of Jesus. I imagine Mary walking the streets of Jerusalem or the whole world, looking at people and saying to herself: "My Son wants to save this person too; He died for them too." The poor, the sick, the rejected, but also and especially the sinner, the blasphemer, the rebel, become the object of her interest, her care, her love, seeking a way to break into their hearts, and ensure that they accept Christ. Have you seen the film "The Passion of the Christ"? After the scourging, they take Jesus away. Mary manages to enter the place and sees her Son's blood on the ground. She runs, takes a cloth, and starts to gather that blood. None of the blood shed by her Son should be lost. A beautiful image of Mary's place in that great mystery. Elizabeth had said, "*Blessed is she who has believed*," and this beatitude is fully realized precisely there, where pain consumes her but does not crush her. It is a "blessed" in full consonance with the Beatitudes of Mt 5 and Lk 6.

Mary would have thought back to those words as well as to the angel's words that, speaking of Jesus, said: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever." Are they a contradiction? We humans would say yes. For her, however, no, because she accepted them with faith. Human nature reminded her then of the words of Isaiah speaoing of the innocent servant condemned for the sins of many. How

inscrutable are the words of God, how inaccessible His will. At that moment, Mary participates in the stripping of her Son, He stripped of His clothes and gradually of life, she stripped of the honor of being a mother, of attachment to all that was humanly left of their relationship.

The climax of the scene, not recounted in the gospels but depicted by many great artists, is when they take Jesus down from the cross, and she, the mother, takes Him in her arms. Here stands the wholeness of human passion, but also its death. Mary cradles the man and God in her arms and, in a supreme act of renunciation, hands over to God the man to whom she was so attached, to remain identified with Him only in the mission, in divinity. The words of Job resonate: "*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised*." I don't know if you have ever had the chance to see the "Pietà" sculptures by Michelangelo. You undoubtedly know the one in the Vatican, considered the most perfect sculpture ever. Well, it was sculpted at the age of 24, at the beginning of his career, but many years later, he sculpted three more. Critics call them unfinished works, but Michelangelo did not leave them unfinished because he couldn't complete them or because he didn't like them, but because he realized he could not give perfect human forms to where the destruction of humanity was celebrated. Mary loses the perfection of human feminine beauty and, through the pain that deforms her, becomes similar, united, almost one with the son she

supports. In one of these, even God the Father supports both Mary and Jesus, and beside them is young John, representing humanity witnessing this fusion.

John Paul II also says: “This is perhaps the deepest "kenosis" of faith in human history. Through faith the Mother shares in the death of her Son, in his redeeming death; but in contrast with the faith of the disciples who fled, hers was far more enlightened. On Golgotha, Jesus through the Cross definitively confirmed that he was the "sign of contradiction" foretold by Simeon. At the same time, the words were also fulfilled on Golgotha, which Simeon had addressed to Mary: "*and a sword will pierce through your own soul also*."

Lumen Gentium 56 says: “The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience.”

We are saved by our faith, but by uniting ourselves with the sacrifice of Christ, we can save others. We must adopt this mystical vision of Mary, who sees in each of her children the one her “Son” wanted to save.

Do you now understand the meaning of what we said when speaking of the wedding at Cana? Pope John Paul II says: “*What deep understanding existed between Jesus and his mother? How can we probe the mystery of their intimate spiritual union? But that fact speaks for itself. It is certain that that event already quite clearly outlines the new dimension, the new meaning of Mary's motherhood ... in John's text on the other hand, the description of the Cana*

event outlines what is actually manifested as a new kind of motherhood according to the spirit and not just according to the flesh, that is to say Mary's solicitude for human beings, her coming to them in the wide variety of their wants and needs ... Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself "in the middle," that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of mankind, and in fact, she "has the right" to do so. Her mediation is thus in the nature of intercession: Mary "intercedes" for mankind..." It is as if after every prayer of ours, Mary would say to Jesus: do you remember how much we suffered on Calvary for this poor child of ours? Do we want to waste what we did there?"

To summarize: what is Mary teaching us?

- Climb Calvary with her, accepting trials, difficult moments. Do not let fear block you but be guided by Faith.
- Let yourself be bathed by the blood of Christ falling, drop by drop from the cross, which purifies us and teaches us to accept with love defeats, misunderstandings, slanders, and sufferings. These are the moments where we purify ourselves, becoming more like Him.
- Take the rest of humanity with us and, with it, descend from Calvary to return to the world and support it with Faith, compassion, and love so that nothing that Christ has redeemed with His blood is lost.

The Mother of the Church

From the Acts of the Apostles. (1:12-14)

> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.
> When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.
> All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

We now want to reflect on Mary, Mother of the Church. This is not just a title but a true way of being and living.
We want to see her attitude as a mother attentive to her growing child, first in her womb and then as a child at home. The Mother is the one who takes care of the family even in the small things, ensuring that everything necessary is there, that the house is in order and welcoming, that there is harmony among the people. If there is a celebration, she prepares a dessert, a special meal; she wants the family to be united in serenity.
The family we want to talk about is the Church, created by Jesus. To establish it, he started with a group to live in fellowship, a strange family made up of different people with

often incompatible characters, just look at the list of the twelve apostles. Luke presents the list twice: at the time of the choice (Lk 6:12-16) and then at the beginning of Acts (Acts 1:13-14), the passage we just read. Notice the difference: in the first list, we have many descriptions to highlight the differences among people. Simon is renamed Peter, he who was so immediate and unstable is destined to become the rock of foundation. James and John are irascible enough to be called sons of thunder. Others' families of origin are mentioned to explain that they still belong to the outside world in some way. We know that Matthew was a tax collector collaborating with the Romans, while Simon was a Zealot, that is, a terrorist wanting to drive out the Romans. The Zealots were perhaps the people who had placed the most hope in Christ but also those who would be the most disappointed, so much so that Judas, probably also a sympathizer of the latter, would betray Him. We can therefore say that Jesus created a group that, at least initially, appeared very unstable. Yet it is clearly said that Jesus spent the whole night in prayer before choosing them.
In the second list, only the names are enough. We are now after the Resurrection and the Ascension, and even though fears remain, the group is now united; Judas is no longer there, but there are women and, above all, Mary, the center of the family. She is not the leader of the group, Jesus chose Peter for that, but He entrusted His Mother with the task of becoming the mother of the group, capable of instilling

courage in the disheartened, patience in the impetuous, wisdom and firmness in the doubtful. She has a duty to oversee how everything goes as Jesus wanted. She does not preach, she does not perform miracles, the apostles take care of that; she silently rejoices in their actions. I like to think that in the evening, when they return tired, or after long journeys, they gather around her, recalling together the words of the "Master" and maybe she adds some little stories of childhood, perhaps the Christmas stories we find in the first two chapters of Luke and Matthew.

An interesting thing to note is that they returned to the “Cenaculum”, or as it is called in the Bible, the Upper Room. Usually, Jewish houses were quite small and single-story. If the weather was good, cooking was done outside and often work was also done outside. Those who could afford it added another room above the terrace where they could retreat to rest in the afternoon when they did not want to be disturbed. This must have been a very large room because it is remembered that at the election of Matthias, they gathered in one hundred and twenty people. Perhaps it was a kind of hostel for travelers. It is certain that they stayed there for almost two months.

I believe that here we must grasp above all the symbolic aspect. It is the room upstairs, that is, not the one for daily life or work, but for the moment when one gathers to be with God, separated from the world, a little above, to make space especially for Him. God's affairs are not resolved

below, but one must be able to elevate above our miseries to look with the eyes of faith. There the group gathers, there the family is formed, the family of God, and then the Mother of God is at the center. Moreover, it is the place where Jesus instituted the Eucharist and created the Church, transferring to the apostles the power to continue His work. There, he gave the commandment of love and washed the feet. There He meets them after Easter to encourage them and reconfirm His mandate and now there they prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit which will inaugurate the new era of the world, the era of Christianity managed by the Holy Spirit. It is important that Mary is there among them because she is the only one who has already received the Holy Spirit and when He came into her, the presence of Jesus was made real in her. The same Spirit will now descend on the apostles, filling them with the power of Christ and reconfirming what Jesus has transmitted to them. Those 50 days from Easter, and especially the last 10, are like a new gestation, a new Advent in which Christ must be made present in the world in a new way, in the sacraments and in preaching with the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and this time Mary is not the one giving birth, but the midwife or better, the grandmother, who assists the daughter, the Church, during childbirth.

This era of the Church, born at the Last Supper and inaugurated at Pentecost, continues through the centuries and we are now the protagonists. God's Church is now spread

across all continents and more than ever bears witness to the redemptive work of Christ. Like all Christians, we religious are called to proclaim the Gospel, but in a special way, we are called to be spiritual guides for these people. Mary is our model.

The vast majority of people are good and honest, but often they are confused, disappointed, tired, or distracted by a thousand temptations. Others, however, suffer from self-importance, they cannot see the needs of others, relationships are too constricting for them, they run too fast and no longer know how to stop and find time to pray and reflect. Mary is the one who patiently and lovingly intercedes for all of them, and we, acting according to her example, must go out to meet these brothers, encouraging and supporting the first, and listening to, gently admonishing with wisdom the second. This is what it means to be "mothers."

During the preparation for Christmas, the liturgy presents us with some examples of physical sterility that, through faith, have become fruitful. We are presented with the mother of Samson, the mother of Samuel, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and in a certain sense also Mary, whose sterility was not due to a physical problem but to a choice of virginity. Well, faith and prayer made it possible for all these people to miraculously generate, and the fruit of their womb was someone important for the history of the people. Perhaps today, if we look at the Church, we see many signs of sterility: the dispersion of faithful who increasingly

abandon our celebrations, the crisis of vocations, but also the sterility of work, because we can no longer achieve what we would like, or the sterility of spiritual life with people, even and especially religious, increasingly focused on doing rather than being. It takes the change dictated by faith. The great crises of the Church are overcome with an injection of witness of faith, courage, and abandonment to Divine Providence.

I want to make a final connection to Christmas. Why did God, in giving Himself as a saving grace for humanity, decide to make Himself small, defenseless, in need of care, and poor? Because grace and charity are connected. Charity is a relationship and to be true, it must maintain the dynamics of the relationship. If it wants to be a total gift of self, this is the meaning of grace, from which the Italian words "gratis" and "gratuità" come, it cannot only give, it also needs to receive, hence the relationship. One who only gives but refuses to receive, or at least does not encourage a movement of return, humiliates the other, placing them on a level of inferiority, while when one puts themselves in the position of needing to receive, they place the other on the same level; it is human promotion before even the solution to the problem of poverty, disability, etc. Therefore, God gives Himself to men but puts Himself in a position of needing men to take care of Him, He saves them but wants to be saved by them. Mary, who understood this because she immediately entered into the dynamic of love, receives

grace freely, protects it, cares for it, and freely gives it back by letting the Son go and continuing to assist Him not as a physical mother but as a collaborator. On the other hand, God returns the gift, making her once again a mother, this time of all humanity, mother of God's plan of redemption. We, like Mary, as children of the Church, must have this dynamic of receiving and giving to make the love we live, true.

I hope you have not gotten the impression that Mary was a passive woman dedicated only to listening and speaking, on the contrary, she is the example of diligence, of activity, that domestic activity typical of mothers who never stop because there is always something to do for their children. I do not believe that the other women of Nazareth noticed anything different in Mary, in the sense that she wanted to place herself above them. Her work of educating Jesus took place in daily work as always, in the small things of home, in the relationships of the village. Mary is a woman who knows how to treasure things in her heart, certainly not a woman who squanders the treasures of the heart in vanity.

The Assumption of Mary to Heaven

This is the fourth Marian dogma, the last to be proclaimed in chronological order. It was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950, but it is a truth of faith that has been professed by the faithful, simple people, since the early centuries.

It is one of the greatest feasts in honor of the Virgin Mary, but we must understand it well to avoid falling into idolatry. Our religion indicates four dogmas regarding Mary: the Immaculate Conception, Perpetual Virginity, Divine Maternity, and the Assumption. It should be emphasized that all four are gratuitous gifts from God and thus there is no merit on Mary's part in them, except of course for the fact that she accepted to become Mother and chose to live her virginity; but in being conceived without sin and being taken up into heaven body and soul, there is no effort on her part.

Mary's greatness lies rather in the way she managed to be a normal woman in abnormal situations, with a superlative lifestyle and commitment. Where was her commitment?

To understand this, I start with two phrases from the Gospel that the liturgy presents to us in the celebration of this feast.

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Lk 11:28);

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God

my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Lk 1:46-48).

Mary had every reason to boast about her situation, but she didn't; she lived with humility, concealment, and silence. Why? Because she was not focused on herself and her own advantage, but on listening to the Word of God and its realization in her son's life.

Those of you who are mothers, think about the anxiety Mary must have felt knowing she had to travel to Bethlehem while already several months pregnant. Think about the anxiety of having to flee to a foreign country with a very small child because of King Herod's persecution. Think about the anguish when she and Joseph realized the child was not with them on the caravan back from Jerusalem. Think about how she must have felt when Jesus eventually told her he had to leave home to start preaching. Think about what she must have felt when she heard news of his miracles, the crowds, but also the opposition from the leaders of the people and the powerful Pharisees. Think about what she must have felt standing at the foot of the cross while they mocked and killed her son.

On none of these occasions do the Gospels report words from Mary. Mary lives through all these events filled with all human emotions, but with her mind and heart turned towards God in an attitude of faith and surrender. Faith says that God is present and knows how to lead history; surrender says that she is willing to do God's will no matter

the cost. Faith and surrender are possible because the heart is full of love, not only the human love that made her indivisibly attached to her son and his fate, but divine love that made her fully accept the plan and gave her the strength to collaborate with it to the end.

So why do we celebrate the Assumption, something that happened to Mary, and of which the Gospel does not speak? This is perhaps one of the questions people ask us and to which we don't know how to respond.

For us Christians, celebrating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven is celebrating our future. We know that at the end of days, we will all have the same fate as Mary, we will go to dwell with Jesus in heaven, body and soul. The Church invites us to give glory to God for the graces worked in Mary, but above all, it presents Mary as a model to follow and imitate.

But why did Mary receive this grace immediately and did not have to wait until the end of the world like all of us? Because she knew how to live in complete union with her son, avoiding sin.

You well know that it is because of sin that the world has been ruined; it is because of sin that suffering and death entered the world. We all share this fate, even the innocent. Even Jesus and Mary suffered and died, but since they never committed sin, they went straight to heaven without their bodies decaying.

The blame lies in original sin, but every time we commit

any sin, big or small, we contribute to ruining the world and thus not only ruin ourselves but also others, even the innocents.

Many of us still think that Mary was very different from us, distant. She was like us, only she lived a perfect life. We are invited by God to live to the same perfection. I know that probably none of us will succeed, but it is important that we do our best.

I would like to emphasize a phrase said about Mary on the occasion of her visit to Elizabeth, who was in need: "*She went in haste*." Mary did not wait to be called, she was the first to move, and she did so quickly. Her cousin's need was reason enough to move Mary, and decisively, without doubts or fears. But why did she do this? Because she thought Elizabeth needed a maid? Elizabeth was rich, the wife of a temple priest in Jerusalem, she could afford all the maids she wanted. Mary made her journey because she heard the angel speak and believed those words. She understood and believed that something extraordinary was happening to her and also to Elizabeth and that the two events were connected. With the help of the Holy Spirit, she understood that it was important for the two characters about to be born, to meet right away. This is how to live to Christian perfection: in faith and charity. We will never be as perfect as Mary and even less as Jesus, but if we live in love, all our mistakes are washed away in God's mercy. Every day we listen to the word of God, but we must believe

that at that moment God is speaking directly to me and urging me to act. What I hear, I must believe and translate into life. I must recognize God who is present in every moment and event of my day.

How many times do we encounter people who need our help? We must not wait to be called; we must be the first to bring the good news of God's love and do so through our love.

This is the path of perfection walked by Mary. This is the path on which we must also walk. We will share her glory in heaven if we strive to share her life on earth.

Mary, our heavenly Foundress

From the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians. (4:4-5)
But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption.

We are well aware of Don Orione's strong devotion to Mary. He was truly in love with her, spoke about her continuously, and spread devotion to her among the people. During the spiritual exercises of 1897, he expressed this resolution: "*After Jesus, Our Lady will be all mine, and no one will love and serve her more than I will*" (scr. 57,78).
Don Orione defined Mary as one of the four loves, the four pillars of his religious family. But what are the characteristics of this love?
Don Orione accepted and celebrated all titles, including regional and popular ones, under which the Blessed Virgin was venerated: Our Lady of Safekeeping, of the Flowers, of the Foliata... He excluded only one, Our Lady of the Cudgel, a devotion suspicious for the political moment in which it was being promoted. Among all the devotions, however, the title that emphasized her sublime greatness and dignity was "Mater Dei" (Mother of God). Under this title, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Safekeeping in Tortona was

consecrated, and with the specific attribute of Mother of God, he wanted the Mother of Divine Providence to be venerated. You are well aware of the episode regarding the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, venerated in the chapel of the Paterno and renamed as Madonna della Divina Provvidenza.

He chose the title of Mater Dei because he always saw Mary in connection with God and at the service of God's plan. And he also gave the reason: the glory of the Saints is represented by the palm or the instrument of martyrdom they carry as a trophy: the trophy of the Virgin is the Child held in her arms. Here is what he once expressed:

"*Our Congregation wants to be and is entirely Mary's... And why? Because She is the Theotokos, the Deipara, the Mater Dei, the Immaculate Mother of God. Here, then, is our task: to associate Mary with Jesus Christ in every religious act and to confess His divinity... We always want to confess, even in the cult of Mary, the divinity of Jesus Christ, as our heart, our mind, and our faith believe, love, and adore Him... After many years of praying, I have decided to place in veneration in our Houses, Our Lady under the title of Mother of God... This is what I would like: we must get used to seeing Jesus in Mary's bosom... We want the Mary with Jesus, we want Mary with Jesus-God. Mary is the Mother of God*!" (cf. Writings 56,215-221).

"*The Mother of Divine Providence is the Mater Dei, the omnipotent by grace*" (Meetings 65).

"I brought you an image of the Mater Dei that I give you as a memento... and I beg you to spread it among the souls and instill devotion to it in the hearts of those in our Houses, opening them to the most tender and filial devotion to the Most Holy Mary, venerated under the greatest and sweetest title of Mother of God. I fervently urge you to spread it widely to increase everywhere the devotion and love for Our Lady according to the spirit you know is proper to the Congregation" (August 15, 1929).

He consecrated his entire life to Mary and dedicated his Work to Her, considering it, not only inspired, but founded by her. "Without Our Lady, nothing is achieved. Do you see the Monogram of the Congregation? (JMPA) Everything is supported and governed by Mary" (scr. 70,318). "Our Institute is particularly consecrated to Mary, and it is under her mantle as her smallest, weakest, and most needy child" (scr. 8,201).

In times of trial, when there were rumours of the congregation's suppression, Don Orione remained firm in his trust: "*We are entering the mystery of the cross. The Most Holy Virgin will assist us as Mother and Foundress*" (scr. 59,23).

How did Don Orione come to identify his work as Mary's, aided by the Lord? From the certainty that all graces and help would come to him from Mary's hands: "*It is the Holy Virgin who does everything. One must firmly grasp Our Lady, and then the Lord will do whatever is desired*"

(scr.9,4). *"Mary is everything for us*" (scr. 30,59).
From these strong convictions, a devotion arose that was:
- Filial:
 - He pierced the ears of the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows.
 - He scattered images of Our Lady (at the Paterno and Villa Charitas).
 - He gave her the keys to the oratory.
 - He asked her to pay the rent.
 - And many other similar episodes.
- Active and Trusting:
 - He promoted pilgrimages to the shrines of Monte Figogna and Caravaggio.
 - He propagated her devotion through preaching and the press:
 - His first two magazines were titled: *La Madonna* and *Mater Dei*.
 - He built Sanctuaries: of Our Lady of Safekeeping, of the Flowers, of Caravaggio, convinced that:

"*By preparing niches for Mary, she will surely prepare a decent one in Paradise for us too*" (scr. 31,62).

"*Let us turn to Mary with great filial confidence and ask for much. The Most Holy Mary would be offended if we asked her for little; it would be like a lack of trust in Her*" (scr. 27,123).

- **But most importantly, nourished by prayer**: "*Pray always, always, always, especially to Mother Mary*" (scr. 56,182). "*I recommend nothing but Our Lady: breathe*

Our Lady, think of Our Lady, seek Our Lady, speak of Our Lady, desire Our Lady everywhere" (scr. 57,128).

- **Nourished by an inner disposition that feels the presence of Mary as an indomitable force behind every action:** "*For some time now, I no longer know how to write without including the name of our Most Holy Mother; and I am always so, so comforted every time I can pray or invoke or at least look at some image of Our Lady*" (scr. 12,124).

These sentiments became more sublime as he approached the end of his earthly journey: "*My last word, the last beat of my heart will be for You, O Holy Virgin and my Mother Mary. Let my tongue wither on the day I do not call upon, do not invoke the Most Holy Mary*" (scr. 38,185).

He had a strong desire for his mortal remains to rest at the feet of Our Lady: "*I wish to be buried at San Bernardino, and at the feet of the Madonna, if possible*" (scr. 5,426). "*In Paradise, at the feet of the Most Holy Mother of God, I want to sing, and I want to sing to Our Lady for all eternity*" (scr. 37,166).

In moments of pain and difficulty, he spoke to Mary like a mother. "*Just thinking of Our Lady, calms the soul, clears the mind; speaking of Our Lady spreads joy like a wave of the sweetest spiritual peace, and invoking her restores courage and brings life back to me*" (scr. 41,48).

On the occasion of the death of Don Gaspare Goggi, he wrote:

"*To You, my dear Mother. For many years, on this holy day, I have come to your feet with the first child of Divine Providence, and every year on this feast, we have come here to your blessed feet, O Blessed Virgin. This year that poor and dear child is dead and I am here alone. I am alone before You. Listen to me, O You, who see and know how to pity a heart that weeps. My son is dead! I have come again to renew my consecration to you and my offering, but I am alone. O Mary, my dear Mother, listen to me; see the tears of my poor heart. You see, this year I no longer know how to speak: forgive me, I am alone. My poor son is dead! I cry and find comfort in thinking that you are so good and can pity me; but I know he is here too. For years we spent this day together; there were three of us: You, dear Mother, him, and me. You too have wept so much, You too, O dear Mother. Let me weep; I am alone. My poor son is dead*!"

But even in moments of joy he wrote about her, as demonstrated by these words written during the construction of the Shrine of Our Lady of Safekeeping:

"*I love the Holy Mother and I sing, I sing to Our Lady: let me love and sing! I am a poor pilgrim seeking light and love. I come to the Shrine with the rosary in hand to become the footstool of the immaculate feet of Mary, forever; I come to seek from Her the light and love of God and of souls. I come to Her and feel a great peace hovering over me. I see her mantle spreading over all the storms, and an*

unfathomable serenity that surpasses the regions of human light and transcends all our splendors, enveloping and penetrating me. And in this intoxicating light, I strip away the old man and love. This love makes me a new man and loving I sing, I sing! I sing ineffably and sing the same Infinite Love and the Holy Mother of Divine Love, and I launch into a boundless height, where, with an immense cry of victory and glory to God and the Holy Virgin, I love and sing."

In difficulties, he had everyone pray three Hail Marys every day so that Our Lady would ask Jesus to increase our trials. One might say: why not ask God directly? The question is theologically correct, but let us also consider the human aspect of those who ask. Turning directly to God might give the impression of being alone, of being presumptuous, of wanting to be proud; by asking through Mary, Don Orione knows that she will stay by his side like a mother who knows what is right to ask and to what extent, but then, like a mother, remains ready to intervene should our strength fail us. Devotion to Mary is therefore not only a theological aspect directed at the intellect but also a human aspect that involves us in all dimensions, including psychological and emotional ones. Spiritual Masters rightly say that great conversions never start from an intellectual phenomenon but always from an emotional impulse and only last if they become practical experiences.

Don Orione's comment is interesting: "Is it possible that

God is offended when, admiring Mary, the masterpiece of His omnipotence, we entrust ourselves to Her as if we were entrusting ourselves to Him? Or is it not He Himself who wants us to entrust ourselves to Her, assuring us that we will be provided with graces as if we were entrusting ourselves to Him? Or is it not much more in accordance with the truth that, rather than being offended, Jesus feels immense joy seeing His Most Holy Mother honored, whom He established as our Mother, precisely so that we might feel more open and, I would say, with a heart wide open towards Her?

Surely Jesus wants to reign through Mary: Mary's mission is to establish the kingdom of Jesus Christ in souls. Loving Mary, one is sure to love Jesus... To Jesus through Mary." (20-8-1928).

He further adds: "Devotion to the Madonna is the easiest way to gradually rid ourselves of our defects. It ignites fervor in us, makes us understand the ugliness of sin and the great misery that is lukewarmness: it makes us realize how incapable we are of good and virtues without divine help. Looking at Our Lady, we understand how we are and how we should be; we immediately see our misery, our littleness, the pride that covers us from head to toe... On the other hand, looking at Our Lady, we feel encouraged to trust, to have confidence in good, we feel hatred for our shortcomings and we feel encouraged to seek perfection with confidence and perseverance" (20-8-28).

Conclusion

In a famous passage, Don Orione says that we all have three mothers: our mother at home, the Most Holy Virgin who was given to us as a mother by Jesus himself, and the Church.

We will never reflect enough nor fully understand the great influence that our mothers have had and still have on our lives.

I hope that reflecting on Mary has led you to understand in a deeper way your identity as Christian, as follower and collaborator of Christ. Many people have a strong devotion to Mary, and often this devotion is even stronger than their faith in God. The problem is that we see Mary as someone emotionally close but distant as a model. Mary must increasingly become a companion on our journey, an inspiration for an inner conversion. The saints used to say: "*Ad Iesum per Mariam*" (To Jesus through Mary), so we cannot dwell on Mary without embarking on a serious journey of conversion with her that leads us to the one Redeemer.

I hope these brief reflections can serve as a starting point for someone to begin this journey.

"*Ave Maria e avanti!*"

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